

The quality and accessibility of primary school music education: Provision, perceptions and hopes in six non-metropolitan schools

Adam Hardcastle

Monash University

Abstract

The National Review of School Music Education has systematically documented the variations in quality and accessibility of school music education in Australia. Rural and remote schools were found to be particularly vulnerable to relatively poorer quality and accessibility. These findings were not new; they echoed similar observations made by official, academic and practitioner observers over many years. This article recounts an empirical study, replicating some of the National Review's investigatory techniques, that tests the applicability of its observations and findings to six primary schools located in a non-metropolitan cross-border region. It concludes that the quality of the music education indeed varies considerably but that the deficiencies are not principally due to insufficient awareness or enthusiasm at the local school level. Rather they arise from a high turnover of staff in short-term or fractional music teacher positions, from inadequate physical space arrangements within most (but not all) of these schools, and from other resourcing limitations.

Key words: primary school music education; educational quality; rural and remote schools; specialist and generalist teachers.

Australian Journal of Music Education 2009:1, 38-51

Quality and accessibility in the National Review of School Music Education

Prominent among the goals of the National Review of School Music Education, which reported its findings in 2005, was to investigate and make recommendations about "the current quality of music education in Australian schools" (DEST, 2005, p. 52). Its Report defined "quality" in a rather loose fashion: that is, "the general standard of music education including the effectiveness of learning, short and long-term benefits and the value of music education" (DEST, 2005, p. 52). This conflates what

seem to be separate issues of quality, purpose and value. In fact, what the Report writes about in terms of "quality" is, sensibly, mostly limited to the initial part of this definition, that is, "the general standard of music education including the effectiveness of learning" (DEST, 2005, p. 104).

The Report found "both strengths and areas of concern". It emphasised that "there are some fine examples of school music programmes" (DEST, 2005, p. 104), with the main factors behind the "success of music programmes within schools" being "the dedication, enthusiasm and expertise of music teachers, the practical and enjoyable nature of the teaching programmes, the support of school

principals and school executives, and endorsement of school music programmes by parents and the wider community" (DEST, 2005, p. xii). But overall the conclusion of the Report in relation to quality is equivocal at best and seriously critical in many respects:

[I]n general terms there is a lack of consistent quality in music education and a lack of consistency in the provision of music education. For some students, no formal music education is provided; for others, music education is fragmentary, delivered non-continuously and lacking the sequential development that is so critical for a solid grounding in music. It is sometimes taught by teachers who are ill-prepared to do so. (DEST, 2005, p. 104)

The main explanation given by the Report for the deficiencies in quality was an apparent deficiency in status, understood as the "relative position or standing of music education in the eyes of teachers, parents, students and the wider community" (DEST, 2005, p. 52). Status, according to the Report, was "seen as an overarching issue in relation to music education" in relation to "the disparity between the status given to music in schools compared with other subject areas" and "the large amounts of lip service paid yet low priority given to music in schools overall" (DEST, 2005, p. 56).

According to the Report, curriculum integration compounded this problem. Queensland aside, about half the schools in Australia integrated music education with other arts disciplines (DEST, 2005, p. 65). The Report was clear that this integration within a "crowded curriculum" has meant that music education is "sometimes given lower priority or even lost from the curriculum". The Report elaborated: "In particular, the sustained continuity that is essential to support sequential, developmental learning in music (as necessary in music as in other subjects) has been severely affected" (DEST, 2005, pp. 104-5).

The Review commented repeatedly on the importance of the calibre, dedication and workload of teachers for delivering good-quality music education, "in many cases in the face of incredible barriers that include excessive workloads, lack of resources, challenging professional environments"

(DEST, 2005, p. 59). Where music education was apparently successful, this was strongly linked to the "commitment, dedication and enthusiasm of teachers". "In nearly all instances", the Report stated, "these were specialist music teachers" along with some cases of "generalist classroom teachers ... involved in teaching music in collaboration with a specialist music teacher in primary schools" (DEST, 2005, p. 68). The Report noted that "the quality of specialist teaching is almost always better than that of the non-specialist" (DEST, 2005, p. 130). This is due both to the qualities of specialists who have a "passion for music and highly developed musical expertise" (DEST, 2005, p. 68) and to the deficiencies in the preparation for music education typically provided in generalist pre-service teacher training (DEST, 2005, p. 109).

On the issue of accessibility, the Report concludes that "many Australian students miss out on effective music education" not just because of "lack of quality of provision" but also because of "the lack of equity of access" (DEST, 2005, p. v). Inequities in access are partly explained by the socio-economic background of students: "students from low socio-economic circumstances ... are often disadvantaged [in access]" (DEST, 2005, p. 110). Where some forms of music education, such as specialised instrumental training, are only available on a "user pays basis" outside of the classroom this "again highlights that those who play music are those who can pay for music" (DEST, 2005, p. xi). Particular disparities were associated with geographic location, and especially with rural and provincial schools: "geography and the tyranny of distance hinder staffing and teaching of music in many rural and remote schools. ... country and rural students are likely to miss out on music education" (DEST, 2005, pp. 105, 107).

A wider context

None of these findings were any surprise to those familiar with the historical and more recent trajectory of school music education in Australia. The official, professional and academic literature is replete with complementary findings and perhaps

comprise some of the endless “hand wringing” described by Jeanneret (2006, p. 93) in an earlier issue of this journal. Going back forty years, for example, a mid-1960s survey of music teaching in primary and secondary schools found that while there were “many schools where the work being done is of very high standard indeed ... [i]n others, practice falls dismally short of the ideal toward which teachers are professing to strive [and] there is a failure to meet even minimal requirements” (Bartle, 1968, pp. 78, 231). In 1977, a NSW departmental study concluded that “the present situation of music in NSW schools was much less effective than it should be ... music was not taken seriously by many teachers and its popularity was static or declining” (as cited in Russell-Bowie, 1997, p. 8).

Perhaps the most systematic attempt, prior to the National Review, to survey the overall quality of music education in Australia was the Stevens Report of 2003. Stevens and his co-investigators found themselves hampered by inadequate information about policies and practices. But they found enough to reveal considerable variation within and between States in terms of the number of specialist music teachers employed, the curriculum status of music, the provision of professional development for primary school music teachers, etc. Their “key recommendation” that there was “a need for a comprehensive national survey of school music education in Australia” (Stevens et al., 2003, p. 14) was fulfilled several years later by the establishment of the National Review.

Some of the submissions then made to the National Review reinforce these earlier findings. The Music Council of Australia’s submission (Letts, Elhay & Lierse, 2005, p. 2) summarised the “conclusion of reviews stretching back 30 years” as being that “music programs have continually suffered from poor resourcing and staffing, insufficient time in the instructional schedule, inadequate facilities and equipment”. The submission claims: “In many school systems, there is no coherent provision of music education to children in the crucial primary

school years”. Likewise the Australian Council of State School Organisations’ submission claimed that “the status of school music ... is generally seen as extremely low in contrast with its real importance”, and that “[m]usic teachers are often unsupported, disengaged and often marginalised by the other teachers” (ACSSO, 2005, pp. 9 and 10).

The “overcrowded curriculum” theme identified by the National Review recurs many times in the literature (e.g., McPherson, 1997, p. 173; ACSSO, 2005, p. 6). Stevens and colleagues noted in 2003 the survival in a few schools of “a systematic and sequential music curriculum” but elsewhere “if music is being taught at all, it is used as a form of pedagogy for teaching the current extra-musical classroom topic or theme rather than being directed to the teaching of the elements of music per se” (Stevens et al., 2003, p. 9). Elsewhere Stevens noted that “the integrity of music as a discrete curriculum area may well be under threat” (Stevens, 2003a, pp. 1, 10; see also Stevens, 2003b).

Likewise, the issues facing generalist teachers identified by the National Review have also been well rehearsed. Russell-Bowie (1997) reviewed many decades of inquiries into music education nationally and in NSW primary schools and found repeated advice that “specialist teachers be used in each primary school” (1966), that “specialist teachers be used in schools to work with classroom teachers” (1970) and that “specialists were needed to assist classroom teachers” (1977). McPherson (1997, p. 174) observed, especially within primary schools, that “general teachers without specialist training in music find it difficult to plan, record and assess music”. Emery (1998, p. 8) observed that “overworked generalist primary teachers” meant that “music experiences are often rushed and limited”. The Music Council of Australia claimed that there is “strong evidence that the use of the primary generalist teacher to teach music is, in a large number of cases, depriving students of a quality music education” (Letts, Elhay & Lierse, 2005).

The National Review’s findings about accessibility across States, regions and social

groups also reflected earlier findings. Russell-Bowie surveyed primary schools in 1991 and found “substantial differences in music education opportunities and practices between schools with higher and lower NESB populations, between those from higher and lower SES areas, and between the rural and urban schools” (Russell-Bowie, 1997, pp. 13-15). The Music Council of Australia’s submission to the National Review in 2005 agreed that there was “an important equity issue in the provision of music education, with schools in lower income socio-economic areas and some country areas disadvantaged. It is primarily the role of governments to address such inequities” (Letts, Elhay & Lierse, 2005, p. 2).

An investigation: methodology

This article takes up the National Review’s concerns about the availability and quality of primary school music education in “geographically disadvantaged areas”. It assesses the implications of the Review - both its findings about current practices and its recommendations for change - within six public-sector primary schools located within the non-metropolitan cross-State “Green Triangle” region of south-west Victoria and south-east South Australia. The research behind the assessment replicated, within this selection of primary schools and in a necessarily limited fashion, some of the investigative techniques of the Review itself. It documented the current music education practices in these schools and then undertook a consultation process within each of them via interviewing key school actors (typically the school principal and one teacher involved with delivering the music program) and inspecting relevant teaching facilities. As the basis for the semi-structured interview sessions, questions were drawn from the two questionnaires (a “school survey” and a “teacher survey”) sent by the National Review team to its national stratified sample of schools. The subsequent observations and findings were modelled along the lines of the “Site Visit Reports” published by the National Review as an appendix to its Report (DEST, 2005, p. Appendix B).

The common regional context produced some similarities across the six schools in terms of local social and economic context and in terms of a common distance from metropolitan centres. Three of the schools are located in South Australia and are therefore under the jurisdiction of the SA Department of Education and Children’s Services and the SA Curriculum Standards and Accountability Framework. The other three are located in Victoria, under the jurisdiction of the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and of the Victorian Essential Learning Standards curriculum framework. This array provided an opportunity to assess the effect of State-specific influences. Two of the schools are located within substantial provincial cities (Mount Gambier and Portland respectively) and are unambiguously urban in character. Two of the schools are located on the outskirts of these cities, with student catchments comprising a mixture of urban and rural families. The remaining two schools are located unambiguously in rural settings in the hinterland of these cities. These contextual contrasts provide an opportunity to assess the effect, if any, of the more localised geographical context.

In the end, the sites selected comprised the following (pseudonyms adopted):

South Australia

School 1 “Riverdale Primary School” (rural)

School 2 “Casuarina Primary School” (provincial city)

School 3 “Meadow Vale Primary School” (fringe of provincial city)

Victoria

School 4 “Forestville Primary School” (rural)

School 5 “Portsmouth Primary School” (provincial city)

School 6 “Beachside Primary School” (fringe of provincial city)

Findings

School 1: Riverdale Primary School

Riverdale Primary School is the Reception to Year 7 component (encompassing the standard South Australian primary-school years) of a combined Reception to Year 12 government area school situated in a small rural township about thirty minutes drive from Mt Gambier in South Australia.

The Principal spoke about the importance of students having a “broad curriculum and ... an exposure to the arts curriculum” and its contributions to the “overall culture” of the school. She described music in general as being useful when used as an incentive for preferred behaviour patterns and making linkages with other areas, such as Information Technology. She claimed that music was especially useful as a positive way to engage with advanced-level boys.

The school had admirably high expectations and standards and was not entirely satisfied with the quality of its own facilities. It had a room, previously an activity room, “that we’ve been doing up” with a new sound system and appropriate lighting but it “still needs a lot of work”. The room was also “sometimes used for other purposes”. There was another room “at the back that we use for props”. Overall “a lot of work” is still needed but “at least [we’re] on our way”.

The Principal explained that, like all SA primary schools, the school now operated with a global budget that permitted greater flexibility and reallocation at the school level. On the one hand, this allowed schools to determine their own priorities to some extent but, on the other hand, it meant that resourcing any particular item - such as the arts in general and music in particular - implicitly meant transferring the resources from other potential demands. The Principal was comfortable that Riverdale Primary was able to creatively balance the competing demands for curriculum space and resources while achieving tangible outcomes in the arts area.

The School, the Principal explained, had

adopted a “multi-arts sort of approach”. She explained that “we don’t do enough music as such” but the “multi-arts approach” was intended as an integrated way of “still giving the kids some good experiences”.

The Principal claimed that within the school’s integrated “multi-arts context” excellent results have been achieved, including some good results in relation to music. But the Principal also admitted that:

It’s very often hard to deliver particularly on music because of the lack of trained people ... we can only have a certain number of specialist teachers because of the way our staffing works with our student numbers ... as much as I would like a dedicated music teacher ... I’ve got to make compromises.

The Principal expressed a strong belief that generalists should “not teach music at all ... unless they have an interest and want to pursue that interest”. Otherwise the music teaching received is “fairly bad”. She expressed the view that it would be difficult for anyone who has not been a music practitioner or who has not been trained as a specialist to effectively teach music. Riverdale Primary, she explained, was fortunate to have a generalist teacher who was also personally involved in the arts area and who had a particular capacity for “sheer enthusiasm and [an] ability to scaffold learning ... for the kids”. But this was good fortune for the school rather than a general practice which, in the Principal’s experience, could be applied at any school. Today’s generalist teachers, she explained, are necessarily focused on literacy and numeracy expectations.

The Principal of Riverdale Primary School had clearly worked hard to build a team approach to the delivery of an integrated arts program and has coached the teaching staff accordingly. She was confident that this hard work had paid off, and that the coaching which had been provided and the culture which had now been established with respect to the arts would serve the School well. But music as such did not have a particular priority

at the school, and instrumental teaching was effectively outsourced to private providers.

School 2: Casuarina Primary School

Casuarina Primary School is a government Reception to Year 7 primary school situated in an urban setting (mixed residential and light commercial, with some major industrial sites in the vicinity) in the major provincial city of Mt Gambier in South Australia. The school is located in a low SES area where long-term unemployment across generations is a particular consideration.

The Principal appeared strongly supportive of performing arts as a means through which confidence can be built and engagement of students achieved. This emphasis on the school's strategy of engaging students from challenging social backgrounds through the performing arts was expressed well by the music teacher:

Engagement brings with it issues of attendance and retention so for students who don't have a strong culture of learning and education – then using performing arts as an incentive for coming to school and then engaging in the other curriculum areas is a good tool and a good strategy. (Teacher)

Casuarina Primary School had committed a great deal of effort to setting up a music suite, providing musical instruments and equipping all the computers with music software. But the interviewees acknowledged that the school was not in a position to provide a top-quality music education.

Casuarina Primary did feature a choir, an achievement which was a credit to the school and to the teacher involved. The choir itself was voluntary across Years 5, 6 and 7. Nonetheless, it only encompassed 26 of the school's 230 students. Thus it was only a "core group that is accessing pure music ... or the theory or notation behind it." The rest of the middle school students undertook "middle school singing ... pop songs ... just a sing-along" (Teacher) while the choir was undertaking its dedicated class. This concurrent timetabling was indicative of the school community support for

music per se. There was a common engagement with the concept of music even if there was only a minority of students accessing the more formal learning.

Beyond providing access to the type of learning experiences described above, there seemed to be a strong commitment to providing students with access to positive experiences in attending performances for either participation or as part of an audience. This included an emphasis, where possible, on transporting the students to engagements out of Mt Gambier. The Principal even used the phrase "lifetime memory" as a benefit of this "for kids who [otherwise] have not left this city either to get to the beach or to Naracoorte [100 kilometres away] – so to get to Adelaide is amazing".

The interviewees discussed the difficulties associated with students having access to learning a musical instrument. The teacher had little doubt that "kids love music – it's universal" and considered it "particularly good for the boys" to be able to "pick up guitar and drum lessons". But providing ongoing opportunities for learning musical instruments was problematic. The Departmental instrumental music service (the same program described above in relation to Riverdale Primary) in this school focused on brass and woodwind: "two units half an hour each ... costing \$10 per term" (Principal) which covered the hire of the instrument, the lesson itself being free. But brass and woodwind had not been particularly successful in the school for reasons attributed by the Principal to the domestic circumstances of the students and their families.

While Casuarina had a generous space for its music room, the interviewees had a sense of vulnerability with regard to this allocation.

[The Department] works out so many metres per student floor space and then that's the amount – that's your allowance for how many rooms you can use in the school, that the Department will pay to be cleaned. ... The downfall of it is that if a school needed a transportable building – even though we say we're paying for this – they can come and take it away tomorrow and we can't do anything about it. (Principal)

It was not just a matter of “space”: “We might have space we can use – like our activity room – but the acoustics are terrible. You need suitable space. It’s impossible to teach without this” (Teacher). In terms of other equipment, there appeared to be a sense of uncertainty as to how to best utilise the limited funds available: “I would like to buy more but [what we have] is not all being used. ... you have to buy equipment that suits the styles that you have” (Teacher).

The school’s “site learning plans” included performing arts and as a consequence music was a priority. The Principal explained that this strategic priority was reflected within the resourcing allocations provided to music from the school’s global budget, though he acknowledged the constraints of a number of demands across the curriculum spectrum.

Music was provided mainly through a qualified generalist teacher (one of the two interviewees) who was essentially employed as a school counsellor. She had a strong interest in music and also taught the choir.

The Principal linked some of the difficulties associated with teaching the arts to the availability of specialist expertise: “I would say statewide the lowest competency level with teachers is in the arts”. He reflected on some comments made by a recently retired staff member who had apparently observed that “when she came out of teacher’s college it used to be that you had to be able to play a musical instrument. And that was a compulsory thing – whereas now.” In other words, there was a perceived problem with pre-service training in terms of the expectations of teaching art – including music - in schools. This was perceived as a problem because “[e]very school is not going to pick up a specialist teacher in music. They’re not out there” (Teacher).

Like Riverdale, Casuarina was a school which was buzzing with enthusiasm and activity. The reception area was welcoming and friendly, and displayed a sense of pride in achievements. The Principal demonstrated a strong professional

commitment to positive outcomes and a sensitive understanding of student needs. There was a strong impression that the school had become “canny” in working out innovative ways in which it could best serve its students in such a way that embraced, rather than alienated, the local community.

School 3: Meadow Vale Primary School

Meadow Vale Primary is a small government Reception to Year 7 primary school located on the outskirts of Mt Gambier in an attractive area featuring small farms and some expensive-looking high-quality residences from which people evidently commute to Mt Gambier on a daily basis to work. Whereas Casuarina Primary unambiguously serves a lower-income area and students walk to school, this is not the case for Meadow Vale Primary, though this does not preclude a number of the children coming from more challenging circumstances.

The Principal considered music “a really important part of the school”. She considered that quality was crucially dependent on having “sufficient money” and on having a teacher with “the skills and the enthusiasm”. The Principal was satisfied that Meadow Vale Primary met these criteria at present in relation to music education, through various initiatives, efforts and programs, and that the students were “lucky” in this respect. The school’s external instrumental person “would like [the students] to be going off for band as well but that would take another afternoon”.

Almost all students in the middle and upper primary years received music instruction in the form of the recorder taught by the generalist music teacher, and use was made of aids such as *Cool Cats* (Dodds, 2007). Recent “special grant money” for which they had successfully applied now enabled this to be extended to “one of the Junior Primary classes as well”. Students were also encouraged to operate peer-support learning across classes. In addition, the generalist music teacher worked from the *Music Room* curriculum (Fairbairn, Leehy

& O'Mara, 2005) with all students in the school. According to the Principal, "it works really well".

The instrumental program, provided externally via the Department of Education, offered clarinet and saxophone and currently involved about 8 students. The instructor advertised this program as an option for students from Year 5 upwards.

On the downside, the Principal acknowledged that the School did not have a dedicated music room:

It would be lovely to have a music room. We have a piano at the school but it's not really accessible. We get dedicated money for literacy, money for maths, money for enterprise but we don't ever get allocated per capita money for music.

The Principal emphasised that none of the additional equipment could have been acquired without the creative use of the grant money that the school had received.

The Principal acknowledged the value that a specialist music teacher on the staff would provide: "Each school would honestly love to have the resource of at least one person on staff that's got a good music background that could inspire other staff". She also acknowledged that an expectation that all generalist teachers would be equipped to adequately teach music seemed unrealistic: "Some would say they're tone deaf and couldn't even use the Music Room program".

The levels of enthusiasm and commitment to positive arts experiences in this school were commendable and one certainly left the school with the feeling that the students' musical opportunities were in caring and capable hands. However, the positive aspects of Meadow Vale Primary seemed to have arisen from some serendipitous events in relation to funding and information-sharing.

School 4: Forestville Primary School

Forestville Primary School was a small government school that teaches from the Preparatory Year until Year 6 in accordance with the standard Victorian primary-school pattern. It is situated in a picturesque, heavily wooded rural location about an

hour from Portland in south-west Victoria. While the school is keen to maintain its (fairly minimal) music-specific external staffing engagement, there had apparently been a steady turnover in terms of the actual person employed (not surprisingly given that the school can only offer the 0.2 contract).

The main purpose of music education in Forestville Primary appeared to be to provide students with the opportunity to make their own decisions with respect to personal music options. The Principal explained that the school worked with a restricted global budget and needed to carefully watch its expenditure. Within these restrictions, encouragement of enjoyment of music where and when possible was purposefully carried out. It was "the love of music" and the recognition of its relevance to other areas which seemed the main priority, with phrases like "not high powered" and "more relaxed" used to describe some of the endeavours. Forestville had devised, within the limitations of its resources and staff turnover, a thoughtful program anchored by an instrumental focus on three basic instruments: recorder, keyboard and guitar.

In response to a question as to whether the students needed to purchase their own instruments, the Principal explained:

We have a couple of keyboards and a couple of guitars. We don't say you "must have" just in case they can't hack it and don't like it or can't afford it. I mean one kid this year had his own cheapish one but he was so proud we let him use it until it [broke]. It's their choice – they're not forced into anything one way or the other.

Beyond this, was there adequate equipment available to achieve the type of experiences that the school seeks for the students?

If we see the need arising we'll do a wish list and work towards that. We plan ahead. But I mean if [the music teacher] came to me and said we have to have 20 guitars, I'd say, well you'll have to rethink your number [laughs] – there's no way. ... We've managed to accumulate a number of things over time ... we've had a few throw-outs when things get beyond the point of no return. But we have a few wriggle sticks, a

few xylophones. I'm happy to show you these after if you like. We try to use what's there.

The school has a specific music room of which the Principal felt particularly proud:

We have one at this point in time until they take it off us. [laughs] ... Because of our numbers we're only entitled to basically three classrooms. They're threatening to take it – but I think it would fall apart if they took it.

Budgetary considerations kept creeping into the discussion and seemed to dominate - even dampen - otherwise enthusiastic aspirations for providing the quality experiences which the school was working hard to maintain for its students. Very often the focus had to be on “the older kids”.

The Principal volunteered that the most important thing in relation to quality experiences was “getting an appropriate music teacher”. The School considered that it had “been lucky to a fair degree in that three of our music teachers have been really good - [one also] brought in a lot of drama and movement”.

Beyond the specifically music-related instruction already described, the Principal referred on several occasions to the importance of integrating music as much as possible into other areas: “classroom based music experience and activity across the curriculum”.

School 5: Portsmouth Primary School

Portsmouth Primary School is a Preparatory to Year 6 school located within the City of Portland. At the time of interview (with some uncertainty as to future arrangements) the school had a music specialist who came in for one day per week, taking each of the six classes for half an hour of “music instruction/enjoyment” (which includes recorder lessons for students in Year 3 upwards). An extra hour was also dedicated to (eight) students in year 4-6 who “want to move ahead with their recorder”. There was also an hour dedicated to choir. As in other schools relying on a fractionally-engaged music specialist, staff turnover and discontinuity had been problems.

The Principal indicated that music served a number of purposes for the school and its students:

For me, it's to be able to provide the opportunity for kids ... to have a go at music and enjoy music and then for those who show talent or an interest to be able to take it a bit further – and be involved with a choir or something.

In relation to quality and accessibility issues, the recurring focus within the interview with the Principal was the interconnectivity that she perceived between quality programs and available staff:

The most important factor for me is whether or not I can staff it. ... If you staff it with someone who wants to teach music it really becomes an attitude thing. They want to teach music because they've got the skills to do it – and they also impart their enthusiasm - and that's infectious I think. Whereas when its generalist teachers who don't have the skills it sort of becomes 'Oh, I have to teach music'. The kids pick up on that and the quality is affected when teachers just aren't comfortable with the whole thing.

The school tried to make music as accessible as possible and, as indicated, all students had half an hour of instruction each week. Years 4-6 also had the opportunity of the recorder group, years 3 - 6 were able to join the choir and there were private lessons available (paid for by the parents) on Friday afternoon.

The school appeared to be “fairly well resourced on instruments, percussion, etc.” (Teacher). Nonetheless it also appeared that the equipment which has been ordered had been done by people who “only [have] a moderate interest in music” (Teacher). There appeared to be a very well intended but haphazard approach to the purchase of music instruments and equipment rather than being reflective of a coherent program put in place by a dedicated specialist.

If you're going to go into a music program you need all these other facilities – if not it does make it tough. There's the expectations. And facilities are a problem. The students also need encouragement

as well as support at home. If you're a person who floats in one day a week, how do you manage all these things? – trying to organise [excursions for community involvement as well] – one day a week is not enough ... I want to give a quality program. But it's hard.

The integration of music education into the general curriculum was what the Principal favoured. To some extent, generalist teachers could undertake the task adequately. Ideally, however, the generalist teachers should be supplemented and guided by the work of specialist music teachers who would be responsible for the overall music program.

You get very mixed results when generalists teach music. Not everyone feels confident I guess. Their interest is not always in music (Principal).

In the case of Portsmouth Primary School, the opportunity to use a (part-time) music teacher only arose when the budget permitted it.

The music teacher herself reflected on the specialist/generalist issue:

I understand that primary school teachers are supposed to be able to teach everything. You can do it but you can't do it justice. I could teach French, I could teach art but I don't feel I can cover all the skills that kids need to know in art because I haven't got that specific training. And I believe that the same thing happens in music – if you can call it music. You can have fun, you can do music but are you really covering all the things in music that you should be covering?

School 6: Beachside Primary School

Beachside Primary is a small government Preparatory to Year 6 primary school located in a little township not far from Portland, Victoria. The township is dependent upon its close proximity to Portland for shopping, services and other facilities, though the school's student population comes mainly from the nearby farms as well as from the township itself.

The Principal placed great emphasis on the school endeavouring to provide "an all-round education" for students from Prep onwards. This

philosophy was certainly intended to encompass music, with the Principal claiming to be very supportive of providing "arts-related opportunities" to all students. But during our interview she mused about the problem of finding adequate time for all the desirable aspects of "an all-round education". Many priorities and demands were placed upon schools and Principals in a crowded curriculum environment and "hard choices need to be made".

If you had to choose between a more "academic" area like Science - and Music ... it would be hard. ... Within the arts area, again, choosing a particular focus is difficult. It would get hard if you had a choice between, say, a person who could teach visual art extremely well, or music extremely well, or dance extremely well. I'm not sure which one would come out on top.

Despite this reservation, Beachside Primary School had offered specific music classes to students since 2004. The Principal thought there was adequate provision for effective music teaching in terms of space and equipment. She explained that they had "a number of Orff-related instruments in the cupboard" which was "full of things like that". These had been acquired over time through "random ordering" by the various people that had been involved with providing music education in some form to the students. The School "also has [the] *Upbeat* [curriculum package]" (Leask 2009).

The Principal thought that, ideally, access to a specialist teacher was an essential requirement for an adequate music program. In the context of the need to prioritise, however, a "chicken and egg type of situation" can arise: "If you haven't got [the subject areas, then] ... you haven't got the opportunity to [attract] ... the right person [that is, the specialist]". The compromise solution which had been adopted and which seemed to address many of the concerns in relation to curriculum expertise in small schools like Beachside Primary was to devise combined positions that served several schools. "What we did at the end of last year was say OK let's combine a few schools so that we can make it a viable position." With this situation the music specialist traveled between schools.

It is interesting that the comments made by the Principal of Beachside Primary School were the most ambivalent encountered at the six schools. Despite this, the music program seemed quite good for a school of its size and resources.

Conclusion

None of the schools really claim to be offering “top-quality music education” (as explicitly admitted at Casuarina) and there was not a great deal of evidence suggesting a systematic, sequential and coherent music learning program across all years. In many cases, only a minority of students within the school had access to both theoretical and practical music learning. In general, however, the efforts being made, especially with the adaptation and flexibility shown, are impressive.

Each of the schools, to varying degrees, recognised that the quality of what could be offered was dependent on having the appropriate teaching space and adequate equipment. The space issue was universally appreciated: schools that somehow had managed to create a special music space treasured it (like the music rooms at Casuarina and Forestville) while those without such a space (such as Meadow Vale) sensed its absence. Whether or not particular instruments are available obviously affects student choice and the breadth of the overall program. All schools explained how they needed a budget allocation that was generous and flexible enough to fund “extras” like excursions and artists-in-residence visitors. While these are seemingly taken up wherever possible and affordable, they appear to be rather random in occurrence rather than forming part of a sequential, coherent learning program. The perceived “squeeze on in music” (Casuarina) imposed by State-level budget constraints was a common observation.

Two non-resource issues emerged. First, the home situation was generally acknowledged to be a strong factor influencing the overall quality of the learning experience with respect to music. This was most obvious where the domestic circumstances

of the students were relatively disadvantaged, such as with the comments made at Casuarina about this being a critical factor in relation to learning an instrument.

Second, and perhaps most important, the qualities and aptitudes of the school staff were evidently crucial: that is, teachers who are enthusiastic and Principals with the capacity to lead effectively.

Music was seen at each of these schools largely as part of a multidisciplinary, integrated primary-school curriculum, supplemented by specialist instrumental instruction (typically via Departmentally-provided visiting instructors or private providers) normally at the discretion of individual families. This inevitably meant that music was caught up amid the competing demands for curriculum space and resources, and always likely (rightly or wrongly) to be seen as a lower priority than “necessities” such as literacy and numeracy and hence at risk of always being “optional”.

This did not translate, however, into an aversion to the input of a specialist music teacher. There was in fact consensus across all of these schools on ideals and realities in terms of specialist music teaching. There was generally a view that the ideal would be having a specialist music teacher if possible. This would not preclude a role in music education for those generalist teachers who were competent and enthusiastic enough to also make a positive contribution (“Each school would ... love to have the resource of at least one person on staff that’s got a good music background” [Meadow Vale]) but specialist teaching and advice was definitely ideal. In practice, the interviewees conceded that having a full time specialist music teacher was not possible given budgets and demands, and there was sometimes also a perception that there was a lack of suitably trained specialists in any case (“They’re not out there” [Casuarina]). So all schools seemed mindful of the need to compromise on the ideal in working out what balance they could achieve in terms of staffing.

While the (Riverdale) view that generalists should “not teach music at all ... unless they have an interest and want to pursue that interest” was more extreme than the norm, it did seem to be widely agreed that the music education provided by indifferent generalist teachers would produce poorer outcomes. There were also cases where positive music learning experiences were seen to be occurring, and this was attributed in the main to being “lucky” in having a sufficiently equipped generalist on board who had an interest in the area. Sometimes these generalists, evidently enthusiastic and conscientious, were apologetic about their music activities (“I’m not employed as a music teacher anyway - it’s just been my interest” [Casuarina]). Packaged curriculum programs like *Upbeat* and *Music Room* were evidently a great help, especially in the absence of adequately detailed curriculum guidelines from the usual State and national sources (“Nothing is issued other than what you get through the essential learnings, I guess” [Portsmouth]). Private providers and visiting instrumental teachers were generally accepted as necessary and useful supplements to the mainly generalist music teaching that the schools could otherwise provide, but there was concern about their variable quality.

There was regret at the lack of sufficient pre-service training to equip generalist teachers. And in every interview there was reference to a strong interest in professional development (“I absolutely lap workshops up” [Casuarina]) and to the lamentable lack of ongoing, accessible opportunities in relation to music teaching (“There’s nothing [or] ... it’s usually in Adelaide from 4-6 pm in the middle of the week” [Meadow Vale]).

The six schools on the interview schedule were chosen to allow some comparison across two different dimensions: whether they were South Australian or Victorian, and whether they were in rural, urban or urban fringe locations. While comparison using the kind of qualitative material collected is difficult, there is sufficient evidence to justify the following impressions.

On the State-level comparison, the fact that all six schools were distant from their respective State capitals gave them all much in common, irrespective of whether that State capital happened to be Melbourne or Adelaide. The effect of distance was both psychological, in terms of being aware of operating at the margins of central supervision, and accessibility-related, in terms of being unable readily to access services and events (such as professional development programs or concerts) held in the capital. What undoubtedly also helped to dampen possible State differences was that neither State system seems to have imposed a particularly rigid expectation about the music content of primary school education. This is in contrast to the clear signals coming from within the State system, via budget allocations and presumably testing schedules, about literacy and numeracy expectations. This leaves local schools with considerable discretion and flexibility, to which they respond according to their own local interests, needs and resources, and hence with no particular State pattern.

On the locational issue, it is easy to be led by the surroundings and the ambience into concluding that there is a lot in common between the two urban schools in contrast to the four other schools in more open, country settings. On reflection, the real commonalities in terms of locational types seem to arise from social composition. The two urban schools drew on a high proportion of families in challenging socio-economic circumstances, and it is this - and how the schools must respond to it - that gives them a common character. The other four schools were different in this respect, with a greater range of family types.

School size (as measured in enrolment levels) is a potentially significant factor but it can be ameliorated through thoughtful collaboration. The larger (that is, higher enrolment, and typically urban-located) schools in my sample have larger budgets and more teachers and therefore, in principle at least, have a greater capacity for flexibility and local initiative. The smaller schools

visited do not have the same capacity, but several of them - rural Forestville and urban-fringe Beachside school - have devised various ways of working cooperatively with others in attempting to mutually enhance the delivery of music education.

In summary, the main findings are:

- that the ubiquitous emphasis on an integrated curriculum necessarily means that music education must fit in with, and to some extent compete with, other priorities;
- that the quality of the music education as delivered varies considerably across and within these schools;
- that while there are instances of interesting and imaginative efforts to provide primary-school students with worthwhile musical experiences and learning opportunities, there is little evidence of the systematic and sequential delivery of a coherent curriculum as envisaged by the National Review;
- that the deficiencies are not principally due to insufficient awareness or enthusiasm at the local school level; rather they arise from a high turnover of staff in short-term or fractional music teacher positions, from inadequate physical space arrangements within most (but not all of) the schools, and from other resourcing limitations;
- that there is general agreement among Principals and teachers about the desirability of employing full-time specialist music teachers, but this is difficult to implement in these schools;
- that because the delivery of music education is dependent in practice on generalist teachers having sufficient confidence, expertise and enthusiasm, the most sensible way forward is to support these teachers with sufficient training, resources and curriculum guidance within a school program coordinated by a music specialist;

- that currently there is insufficient pre-service training or ongoing support through in-service professional development available to assist generalist teachers to acquire and improve their music-education proficiency;
- that State-level influences do not seem particularly significant in explaining local primary school practices in relation to music education, while any urban/rural differences are probably better explained as reflecting the socio-economic background of the school students.

References

- ACSSO [Australian Council of State School Organisations]. (2005). *Improving the Condition of School Music Education Across Australia: A Submission to the National Review of School Music Education*. Curtin, ACT: ACSSO.
- Bartle, G. (1968). *Music in Australian Schools*. Hawthorn: Australian Council for Educational Research.
- Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). (2005). *National Review of School Music Education: Augmenting the diminished*. Canberra: Department of Education, Science and Training.
- Dodds, D. (2007). *Music Theory for Cool Cats: Beginner Book. A Recorder Edition*. Templestowe: Bushfire Press.
- Emery, L. (1998). *The Arts: A Statement on the Arts as a Key Learning Area of the School Curriculum*. Paper prepared for Queensland School Curriculum Council. Melbourne: University of Melbourne.
- Fairbairn, R., Leehy, M., & O'Mara, K. (2005). *Music Room*. Templestowe: Bushfire Press.
- Jeanneret, N. (2006). The National Review of Music in schools and the endless debate about music in primary schools. *Australian Journal of Music Education*, 2006(1), 93-97.
- Leask, J. (2009). *Upbeat: Music Education in the Classroom*, <<http://upbeat.net.au/upbeat>>.
- Letts, R., Elhay, S. & Lierse, A. (2005). *Submission to the National Review of Music Education in Schools for the Music Council of Australia*. Malvern: Music Council of Australia.

- McPherson, G. E. (1997). Music in a changing environment: An Australian perspective. In S. Leong (Ed.), *Music in Schools and Teacher Education: A Global Perspective* (170-178). Nedlands: ISME Commission for Music in Schools and Teacher Education.
- Russell-Bowie, D. (1997). Is anything new under the sun? Researching research into primary music education. Paper presented at the AARE National Conference, Brisbane, November.
- Stevens, R. S. (2003a). "Through a glass darkly": A Report on Trends in School Music Education Provision in Australia. Paper presented at the Twenty-Fifth Annual Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Music Education, Griffith University, Brisbane.
- Stevens, R. S. (2003b). Endangered species or hardy perennial? A Report on the MCA's Research Project on Trends in School Music Education Provision in Australia. *Music Forum*, 9(5), 32-36.
- Stevens, R., Findlay, G., Power, A., Beston, P, Lewis, N., Brown A. et al. (2003). *National Report on Trends in School Music Education Provision in Australia*. Sydney: Music Council of Australia in collaboration with the Australian Society for Music Education and the Australian Music Association.

Adam Hardcastle has taught music in schools in Portland, Victoria and Mount Gambier, South Australia. He has studied composition and singing at the Elder Conservatorium of Music at Adelaide University, drama and Asian studies at Flinders University, and primary/secondary teaching through Deakin University. Adam has completed a Masters Degree in Music Education through Monash University where he is currently undertaking doctoral studies. He has been involved in interstate and overseas tours with choirs such as the National Youth Choir of Australia, Voiceworks and the Adelaide Chamber Singers, and is Director of the Portland-based Cockatoo Valley Song Group.